

Stem Cell Elevator Pitch Challenge

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The Challenge

"What do you do for a living?"

If a scientist's answer to that question isn't comprehensible (or perhaps even fascinating) to the average person they risk losing the attention of journalists, potential donors, politicians, or all those good people whose tax money funds their science. What's at stake isn't just the listener's attention. If scientists can't explain the value of their publicly funded research in a way that makes sense to the non-scientist, they could lose the support of the tax-paying public.

With that in mind, we held an elevator pitch challenge to help our scientists talk about their work. Here's our pitch for the pitch:

Some people sent us elevator pitches that they recorded back at their labs, and others recorded them with us at the grantee meeting. Altogether, we got 57 videos, all of which you can see here. Our judges scored them based on brevity (shorter videos got more points), clarity and creativity. Then we chose the top three scores in two categories: lead scientists (those who run their own labs) and non-lead scientists.

The winners

Read the full announcement of the contest winners here.

Non-lead scientist

1st. Jonathan Lam (UCLA, stroke)

2nd. Suzanne Peterson (Scripps Research Institute, Parkinson's)

3rd. Michael Rothenberg (Stanford, intestinal cancer)

3rd. Anica Sayoc (City of Hope/CSU Long Beach, leukemia)

Lead Scientist

1st. Amy Sprowles (Humboldt State U., cancer/Bridges Program)

2nd. John Zaia (City of Hope, HIV/AIDs)

3rd. Paul Knoepfler (UC Davis, cancer stem cells/epigenetics)

Most creative

Asaf Presente (UCSD, lung disease)

The ones that got away

Our judges had a hard time limiting themselves to just three winners. Many of the videos stood out for their clear descriptions, creative analogies, or their passion, even though they didn't end up being the top scores. Here are some that our judges felt need a mention.

Non-lead scientist (in alphabetical order)

- Victoria Bendersky ("disease description draws the listener in")
- Joseph Hargan Calvopiña ("great job explaining a complex topic")
- Stefano De Sacco ("clear, engaging")
- Matthew Donne ("long, but creative & engaging")
- Andrew Goldstein ("long, but good description")
- Yongtae Jeong ("clever analogy")
- William Kim ("very clear and enthusiastic")
- Anjana Nityanandam ("compelling description")
- Ron Piran ("short & clear")
- Sargis Sedrakyan ("short & clear")

Lead scientists (in alphabetical order)

- Gage Crump ("great description of why animal models are important")
- Darryl D'Lima ("interesting, clear & short")
- Andrew McMahon ("quick, clear explanation")
- Carrie Micelli/Stamley Nelson ("love their commitment")

- Toshio Miki ("easy to understand even with an accent")
- Deepak Srivastava ("clear description, interesting work")
- Marius Wernig ("his excitement comes through")
- Vicki Wheelock and Leslie Thompson ("very passionate about their work")

Thank you to all the scientists who participated. Regardless of who won the contest, the real winners are the people who run into these scientists on elevators, at dinner parties or on the street and who might now get shorter, clearer explanations of the great science these people are doing.

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